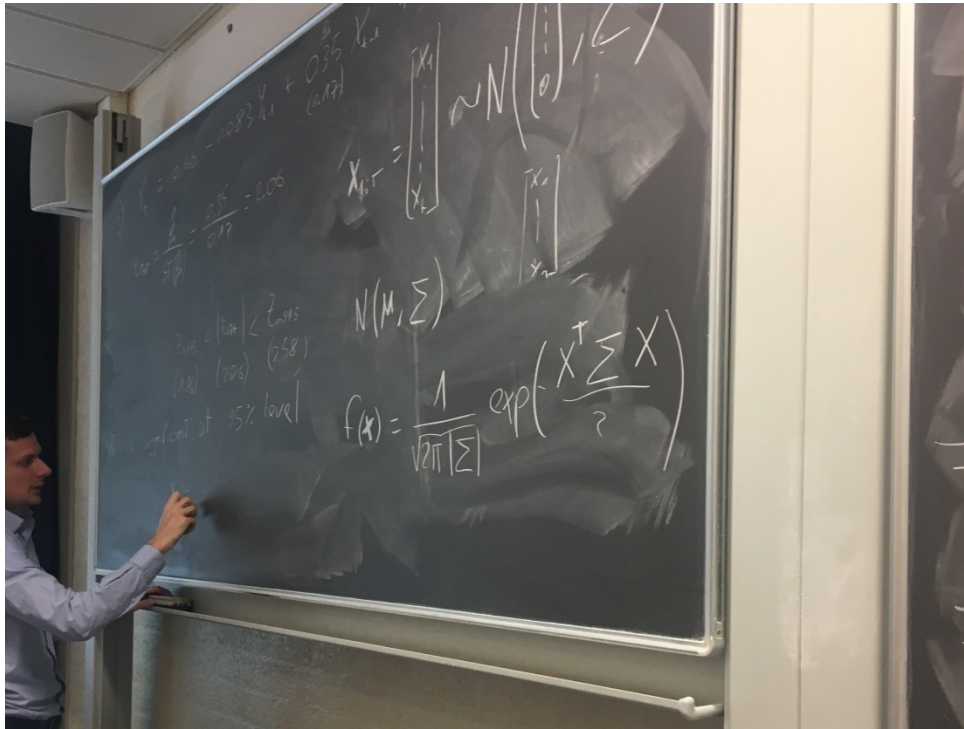


Academics



As I walked towards the VU main building for my first day of classes, 30 minutes before the class actually began, I looked down at the combination of letters and numbers that was supposed to tell me where my class was, and I was hit by a wave of being overwhelmed. There was a throng of well-dressed, put-together people chatting in Dutch and heading towards the gigantic elevators only to be merged into a bigger throng of people. For those of you who do not know, the VU building has fourteen stories and eight elevators. And every morning, when people are headed to their classes, it is a passive-aggressive battle scene with every man for himself, every person just hoping to somehow make it to a class full of hundreds of other students on time.

There are so many differences between academics at Grinnell College, a small liberal arts college in the middle of Iowa, and academics at Vrije Universiteit, a huge university in the middle of the city of Amsterdam.

In the Netherlands, the semester is divided into three periods, and you can choose to take only two courses during the first two periods. The first two periods are eight-weeks-long. This format has its pros and cons and is different from the structure in the United States where you take four courses for the duration of the entire semester. The good part of this is that for those two months, you can only concentrate and completely delve into the material from those two courses. But on the flip side, because the classes are so short, it feels a little rushed and students do not have much time to grapple with the material before exams hit. Another format-based difference is that most classes here last for two to three hours (!!), as opposed to

the 50 to 75-minute classes that I am used to. Personally, I do not enjoy the long classes much since my attention span is inversely proportional to the length of the class, and I find myself falling asleep as soon as we hit the one-hour mark. Although the 15-minute coffee breaks are a blessing sent from heaven.

During the first period, I was studying Econometrics and Time Series, both classes which are very theoretical and require a lot of prior knowledge. In higher level classes like these in the US, people have a more or less homogenous background knowledge. However, since not all students at the VU are bachelor's students, I found that my classrooms were full of students from various backgrounds and disciplines. Students came from various places around the world and many of the bachelor's students were studying various specialized topics. In my classroom there were also master's students and students who had studied marketing or business and were just looking to learn something. Furthermore, due to the diversity of academic backgrounds and the fact that many students are perfectly happy with just a passing grade, I think the drive of students here is different from students in the US where people care a lot about their GPA. I think people here actually care more about learning the content and making the most of their courses in order to further their careers, as opposed to just getting an A.

The way the classes are taught is also very different. In my classes which are very large, no one asks questions during class, there is no discussion, and most classes consist of the professor giving a lecture using a power point presentation. If you want, you can ask questions by appointment or email. I think for quantitative classes like mine, this actually works better since questions sometimes break the flow of the class. Also, the professors upload the power point presentations after the lectures which help a great deal with studying. But, because of this format, not many people attend the class, so my class of 100-150 students usually has approximately 50 students! This is very different from the US, where if you do not show up for 3-4 classes it leads to an automatic grade reduction. Due to this fluctuating attendance rate and the fact that this is a bigger university, the general attitude with which the professors teach is very different and almost relaxed.

Furthermore, because VU Amsterdam is located in a city, the general approach towards college is different. People have more going on in their lives than just studying. Back in college in the States, you are a full-time student and you do other things if you find the time. But here, people attend college, go to work, and have a whole lot of other things going on. Also, for me, because this is study abroad, I want to do a lot of other things as well. Oftentimes finding the balance between going out, travelling, and studying is tough, but it has been an amazing experience so far.

And finally, taking my final exams for the first period was a strange experience for me. Almost 100% of the grade for most courses is based on the final assessment which creates a lot of pressure to do well on just one exam. Also, I am used to working in study groups, but here, because most people already had their pre-made groups and mostly spoke in Dutch, I did not find one. However, studying alone and at my own pace was also a fun experience. One thing that I liked was, because the campus is so big, it was always easy to find a spot to study. And

finally, taking the exam at the RAI Convention Center with at least a thousand other students taking ten different exams under one roof was a peculiar experience. It was like a concrete playground in which desks had just been placed in small groups, the instructors were giving instructions in Dutch, students had to be escorted to the bathroom, and yet students were also randomly exiting and entering the exam hall.

Between the studying, trying not to fall asleep during the lectures, gulping coffee between breaks, procrastinating because Netflix and YouTube and impromptu gatherings are way more attractive, the cramming before exams, and the last-minute revision of notes... At the end of the day, despite all of these small differences, academics around the world still feel the same everywhere!